

TENTH BIENNIAL CONVENTION OF
A.A.W.B. JANESVILLE, WIS. 1923
AN HOUR WITH WILLETTA HUGGINS

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Tenth Biennial Convention
of
American Association of Workers for the Blind.
Janesville, Wis. June 21-26, 1923.

June 22, 1923.

An Hour with Willetta Huggins.

Supt. J. T. Hooper of Wis. School for Blind.

The most interesting afternoon of my life from a pedagogical point of view was the one I spent with Willetta Huggins and Helen Keller when they met. We went to the Park Hotel where Helen Keller was staying. When she came into the room it seemed as if two souls that had lost each other were rushing together, and without any suggestion from anybody in the room they immediately rushed into each other's arms, and then began a series of soul communication which most of us in the room could not understand. The strangest part of it was that although Willetta talks naturally, and Helen Keller when she converses with most people talks, on this occasion neither of them spoke a word, but they immediately began to spell out words on each other's hands. And it was only after we stopped them and told them we did not want any secrets, that we wanted to know what was going on, that they began talking to each other in a vocal way. And then when they wanted to get something over of special interest to themselves they would immediately go back to the spelling.

Willetta placed her hand on Helen Keller's breast. Helen Keller placed her hand on Willettas vocal chords, over her lips with one finger up over her nose. Many, many times during the conversation Willetta was the only person in the room that could correctly and immediately interpret what Helen Keller was saying. We didn't always understand her. But Willetta never failed in understanding. I am giving you these things because I want to prepare you for something that is coming later.

A picture was taken of Willetta and Helen Keller talking to each other. Helen Keller is of a very nervous, high strung, sensitive type of human being. Willetta is very sensitive but nowhere near as demonstrative. When Helen Keller has her pictures taken she must be warned immediately before or she jumps and spoils the picture. Nobody doubts that Helen Keller is totally blind and deaf. When the first picture was taken Helen had not been informed and she spoiled the picture. After the picture was taken I went to the two girls and said, "Helen what made you jump?" and she answered "I felt the vibration and I felt the light". I turned to Willetta and said, "What did you get and why didn't you jump?" She said, "I felt the vibration and I felt the warmth but it did not startle me." I have a number of photographs of the girls taken together and they will be on sale down on the counter with the other things. tomorrow. Anybody that wishes them can get them.

In 1915 Miss Turner, who was then our field agent, found at Eau Claire a girl 10 years old with very defective vision, who was reported by her teachers and the city nurse and everybody that knew anything about her as a child of questionable mentality, dreadfully sub-normal, and it would appear so because at 10 years old she had just finished the first grade in school. She came to us and we taught her New York points system of reading, but she made very unsatisfactory progress. We considered her dull, stupid, phlegmatic, not responsive child, and we had little hopes of development.

In October, 1919 after a severe cold one morning she came downstairs crying and reported that she could hear nothing. We knew that one ear was bad. We took her to our specialist who treated her for a month, then we took her to the University Clinic and Dr. Davis treated her for six weeks, then reported that she was totally deaf of an incurable trouble from which no one ever recovered, but it would make very little difference because she was a decidedly subnormal type.

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All that we got out of that trip was a case of smallpox. She ^{came} home, broke out with smallpox and infected the school. She went home utterly discouraged, with very defective vision growing worse and hearing all gone, not very much hope for the future. During the summer of 1919 she met a Miss Smith of Eau Claire. Willetta's folks had moved to Chippewa Falls. Miss Smith was a teacher of the deaf and she told her of Helen Keller and how she heard by putting her hands on people's lips and reading their lips. She didn't like to put her hands on people's lips and she thought that other people didn't want her hand there and so we didn't experiment with that. All the fall after that we noticed that she was continuously going around with her hand on her vocal chords. And the girls in her room reported that she was continually putting her hand on their vocal chords.

In October 1919 just about one year after she woke up totally deaf, she came down with another severe cold. She was always having these colds. She reported that she not only could not hear anything but she could see nothing now. Then followed three or four weeks of the most despondent cases of humanity that I have ever known. She did nothing but sob. She saw no future and we certainly as teachers saw no way by which we could help her. We had another child that had been here that had learned the deaf alphabet and by working through that we were able to find out her wants.

Two or three weeks after she reported that she was blind we discovered her talking with one of her schoolmates with one hand on her schoolmate's vocal chords. I immediately went to her and spoke to her and found that she could hear me easier and much better than she could her schoolmate, and I afterwards learned that she can hear all men, especially men with strong carrying voices, much better than she can hear women. High pitched voices are not as easily heard as low keyed voices. They do not make as strong a vibra-

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tion. From that of course we found that we could get in touch with her, and by the end of the year or by Christmas 1920, at least early in January she was able to talk with anybody by using her hands on the vocal chords or on the chest. It developed slowly from the vocal chords to the chest because it is easier to get at the chest. It was carrying out the principle of the telephone. If you have any difficulty in making anybody hear if you will put the transmitter to your chest you will find they have no trouble to hear you.

In April, 1921 I took my children to the Legislature and took Willetta along and gave a demonstration. After the demonstration the legislators and the people of Madison, state officers and others crowded around and talked to her, and I was talking to some one in the middle of the Assembly Room, and looking around found her talking to a man with her hand on his head. Immediately the thought came to me, is that germane to a legislator only? And as soon as I could get away I went down to where she was and put her hand on my head and she said she heard me better than she heard him. I have learned since that the head is one of the best sounding boards we have.

It would be just the same with every one of you. I don't know whether it is because it is solid ivory or wood or whether it is hollow. Try putting something on the head and every time you will feel a strong vibration.

We have developed these things until now she can talk to anybody by putting her hand on the chest, on the head, or on the back, anywhere where she can get a good sounding board from the vocal chords. We found in the fall of 1921 that she could hear what was said to her over the telephone by putting the ^{finger} little of her left hand in the receiver, just lightly touching the receiver. Many, many people take her hand and press it tightly against their breast. Just a light touch is all that is necessary. If I push her hand

against my breast it is difficult for her to hear me distinctly .
It must be a light, delicate touch.

When I was at the State Fair I took Willetta with me. I usually go to the State Fair and give an exhibit of what the State School is doing in order to educate the seeing people on the blind. When I was there I went to the house of a friend and I called Willetta on the telephone and talked with her. I wondered if it was my voice only that she would hear and I called the man of the house and others who were there and she heard them all. We had to be connected away downtown and back up four miles away. I called the little girl. I called the girl's father, a man whom she had never heard and she clearly heard the girl's father.

Out of that I developed that there must be some way that she could hear through some kind of a commercial instrument. There are lots of people who can hear with an instrument who cannot hear without. So that after I had worked this out I sent to several dealers in this kind of instrument. They send them to deaf people free of charge for sixty days and I tried several out until finally I decided on this one. We bought this for her seventeenth birthday a year ago last March. This is called a portophone. This is an amplifier, this the battery, this is where she puts the little finger of her left hand. (Indicating parts) That is the best ear she has. With that instrument she goes to her classes and gets every word as an ordinary person.

We further developed. We find that there are conductors of sound much better than the ear. I can take a stick like that and talk with her by it. I can talk to her in the loudest tone of voice I can command and I cannot even get the bat of an eye or change of expression. Now take that stick, let her put her hand on that and I turn my back to her and drop my voice as low as this, and in an ordinary talking tone and she will get every word of it. These experiments you won't have to take for granted. I will work them

out at the end of the hour with Willette.

Now the other thing. That is the deaf side of it. Now turn to the blind side. The only thing we were able to make any progress with Willetta before her great affliction came, or handicap, as we call it, is sewing. In that she was not subnormal. After she became deaf and blind she was a much better sewer than she was before, and she had more interest in it, but she needed different colored threads in sewing upon the garments. Her teacher noticed that Willette whenever she was handed a spool of thread of any color put it to her nose. She said nothing about it but every time a spool of thread was given her she smelled it. At the end of three or four months she informed her teacher, "You need not tell me what color the thread is any more, I know myself. I can smell it." We didn't believe it and we tried her out and found she was fairly correct about telling the color of every spool of thread given her at that time. We developed this as much as we could and we have found that the sense of smell is wonderfully developed.

I think it can be developed in others, how many I don't know. But she can distinguish not only colors but the shades of different colors by the sense of smell. And there can be no question but what she does this by the sense of smell. We demonstrate this by putting upon her a blind fold we defy the best seeing person in this room to see anything with it on, and unless I am mistaken she will show you a hundred percent. perfect. She can not only do that but she can take a photograph or picture in the newspaper and tell you how many faces in the picture, except the old fashioned glazed picture, which seem to be covered with a film, those she cannot tell anything about. Glazed paper, highly enameled things of any kind she is absolutely lost as to the feeling.

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Now her sense of touch. Her sense of touch is the keenest I have ever known in any human being. It is so keen that when we had her in Chicago Dr. Gault the head of the Northwestern Medical Society made this statement: "Her sense of touch is so keen that there are not manufactured anywhere in the world instruments fine enough to measure it". It is so keen that she can take paper money, run her fingers about the corner, feel the numerals and tell you the denominations. She can go over this room from person to person and tell you the color of your dress, your necktie, the color of your shirt. In an ordinary room where there seven or eight people, with her back turned she will tell you how many people there are in the room by the sense of smell. She will tell you whether the cat comes into the room or whether a dog comes into the room. You make fun of the statement that every one has their own individual smell. Doesn't your dog follow you down through the streets where hundreds and thousands of other people have gone, by the sense of smell? Don't you know you have just as definite a personality as far as smell is concerned as by your looks? You don't any of you look alike, nor there don't any of us smell alike. That is one thing we want to press home to you. We have thrown away as human beings one of the keenest and most reliable senses which any animal possesses, because we had the sense of sight and the sense of hearing. They are lazy senses and we don't use our sense of smell and our sense of touch as we ought to do.

Now I want to get to the most interesting part and the most remarkable part of all. Here is the thing that I have studied most and here is the thing which to my mind is going to be the most use to humanity. Before she became deaf and blind she was always considered by everybody that ever saw her, even the experts at the University of Wisconsin, as a decidedly subnormal child. After she began to use the senses which were not defective, but which were remarkably keen, she has developed into one of the brightest, keenest most responsive children I have ever known. Why the change?

How many other boys and girls throughout the world in our schools and in other public schools are called subnormal that are not subnormal at all and are only lacking development because we are so stupid that we do not know how to get in touch with the person inside. We tried for years to get things into her intellect through avenues that were clogged, that were defective. She got nothing clear, she got nothing definite and she appeared stupid. Just as soon as God cut off those avenues that we were using or misusing and she was forced to use other avenues she changed absolutely in her temperament, in her reaction, in her development. If, after you have seen her tonight, you see any sign of subnormality, I am willing to give up my proposition. A large number of the ordinary so-called subnormal children are not subnormal at all, and we must find some way by which to reach that child. How many of us who call ourselves normal, how many of us are developing anywhere near to the extent that we ought to develop? We are using only a part of the senses in contact with the outside world. And I believe that out of this case there is going to come not only something of help to the blind and the deaf, but something that is going to change the whole attitude of our people towards the so-called subnormal child, and those are to be educated.

I question whether the idea that there are certain centers of the brain that function only for hearing and other for seeing, whether that is absolutely true or not, or whether we have gone off on a tangent. I have thought here in this connection and so have other people that the brain not only has centers but that those centers corodimate all the time and those centers cross over from one to another, and I think this shows that we are getting information through other cents than we think. Any one who has worked with the blind or the deaf knows that this is true that we do not get all through the sight that we thought we did.

The next speaker I am going to introduce is Dr. Thomas Williams of Evanston, Illinois, a doctor who has taken a personal interest in Willetta, who has examined her many, many times, and who will give you his reaction from such examinations.

Dr. Thomas Williams.

Mr, Chairman, ladies and gentlemen: The case has been so well covered that I am a little like the ^{tress} wai/who came up to a man in one of our hotels in Chicago the other day and asked what she could bring him, and was told "Please bring me a steak moderately well done and a kind word". She went to the kitchen and brought the steak to him and was turning away when he said "Just a minute, haven't you forgotten something", and she said "No sir, you asked for a steak didn't you?" "Was that all I asked for?" "Yes, I guess so." He said "I asked for a steak and a kind word. You brought the steak but you didn't give me the kind word". "Do you want it sir?" "Certainly" She says "'sh, don't eat it".

It is a distinct honor and a great pleasure to come to you tonight and share with you the enjoyment of the hour with Willetta. One message that seems to need careful emphasis is, are you using your talents in the way of education and encouragement? I do not mean by this that we could all do what Willetta does. Nothing contributes much more than opening up new avenues. Education is our best means of opening up these avenues.

I will give you some of the data that I have from observation of Willetta, in a pamphlet form. I will be glad to mail it to you. This is an extract from the American Medical Journal showing what we have obtained in this case. I don't know whether you are aware of it, but as soon as we began to tell what Willetta could do there was some controversy as to whether or not she was able to do the things we claimed for her. It did not take long for some people

in this state to contradict that she could do them, and it is not remarkable. The fact is anybody contradicts. I was reluctant for some time myself and it was only after painstaking experiments that we finally came to the conclusion that we had to believe what we saw and heard. One of the men is Prof. Jastrow of Madison, Wisconsin. He wrote an article in a medical journal.

(Extract read.)

She has one thing that is rather interesting. We could not tell you were it not exactly what we saw her do. The sense of smell is a sense that human beings have practically lost. Many, many years ago the Arabians used to arrange their gardens for the smell. They had odors on different sides, and you were led into the garden and told to get some particular strong odor. At that time so far as we are able to discern the sense of smell was most acute in human history. I am talking of course of civilized human history. We have at present in New Zealand some of the original tribes that is, certain parts of those tribes, that will smell and track other men through the forest. They have a very good sense of smell. The negro has a better sense of smell than the whites. The negro has very little nasal trouble. The angle saxon with the narrow forehead and nose has a great deal of trouble with the smell. Willetta here you will notice has rather a broad nose and that may contribute to a certain extent to the fact that she is an anatomical explanation for the strong sense of smell. Some odors seem to give her a sense of pain. If any of you see rails being cut with an acetylene light and you look at that light without protecting your eyes you get a touch of pain. You get the same thing from intense sound. If any of you present were in the army during the late war you will remember the terrible aural shock we used to get from the cannon being fired. Willetta gets shocks from painful odors. She is very sensitive. (Extract from medical journal read.)

Mr. Hooper:

You probably are looking at a girl that, so far as we have any record of, is capable of doing things that nobody else in world has been able to do, of which we have any record. Of course it is hard to tell in the case of the parties that have not been written up. Since we have written this up I have gotten letters from London and from a friend in Europe citing cases that did some particular thing that Willetta is doing and trying to do, or what she was able to do. And in one if not in most cases, after two or three years they have proven to be hoaxes. These friends of mine beg me to take steps to see that I had protection, not to be dupsd. She has no desire to deceive anyone and really no motive for it.

One of the people who got in touch with Willetta and interested in her was Dr. George Gault psychologist of Northwestern University. Last summer he came here and stayed two or three weeks and at times he had with him an assistant. We wanted to have Dr. Gault here to give the result of his experiments, but Dr. Gault couldn't come and he sent his very able assistant Prof. George Crane, and I have great pleasure in introducing to you Mr. George Crane, who will tell you what the university is doing with normal sighted and normal hearing people at the university for the benefit of the blind and deaf. This is cooperative evidence of what we are doing here.

Prof. George Crane.

I want to tell you what we have done concerning the ability to hear through one's fingers. We did not have deaf person, so we took a normal hearing individual, my brother. We inserted corks in his ears, then put thick bandages, over this strapped woolen bandages. We constructed a sound proof box, and set a motor going in the room next to the subject, which made a roaring noise. In that box there was a pipe that ran horizontally through another room into a third room. At the far end of that pipe was a mouth piece and through

that I spoke. I took the two words "tray" and "not". I taked into my end of the pipe these two words in different periods of time. Out of 70 utterances he got 68 correct. So we got a third word, and the second time out of the three words he got 69. Now we have 37 words on the list, automobile, SanFrancisco, Chicago, &c. This subject can get sentences out of this list of words at about this rate of speed (Illustrating).

Voie from audience.

How does he get the sound?

Beg your pardon, I should have told you. He has his hand ^{proof} inside of that sound/box, the palm of his hand is pressed up against the end of the pipe, and then I talk through the other end of this tube, and the sound vibrates right along that pipe against his hand. I can ask him "Did you decide to go to Chicago?" and so on, and he can get the sentences. And if we go on practicing he will get so ^{hear} he can/ everything spoken. Prof. McDonald of the University, Prof. Warren of Princeton University and a professor of the University of Chicago all state that the results are authentic.

We received a letter from Prof. Jastrow saying "the hand cannot and never will replace the ear as a means of hearing". Prof. Jastrow has confused the terms rather than the facts, as he would see if he saw us at work. If he means that the hand will never hear he is correct, but one can interpret oral words with one's hands, through learning to discriminate various vibrations by touch, and by that discrimination distinguishes one from another. So for the whole period of five months the subject put his right hand inside the box and his right palm on the end of that pipe, and we took a last test and he did just as well on that day as he had on any previous day. He could have done as well had he placed the end of the pipe at the sole of his foot. That discrimination by means of touch is not of parts as well. So with him he was thinking in terms of hearing and straining his

ears only to the terms that I was uttering; but as we progressed he learned to think in the matter of touch. My brother says that some words are nice to the touch, that the word "ray" feels like a lump of cold butter rolled down the spine.

Prof. McDonald asked if he could hear any words naturally and then distinguish them. He wrote down a list of 12 and showed them to him. Not a word of that 12 had he heard before. Now, he said, I will choose 6 of these words and have your brother speak them to you through the tube, and I did that, and he named 5 of those words correctly, missing only one. Those words he had never had any trial on and had never heard through the tube.

Next year we are going to get some deaf people there and try to educate them, and try to see if we cannot develop the sense of hearing through touch. We hope that by this education of the deaf we will be amply repaid for this effort of research.

Mr. Hooper.

We always take the smelling experiments first because that is one under which she seems to tire the quickest. Those of you who cannot see I want to say that I have here a pair of automobile goggles lined with black paper. I stuff that with cotton. Now Mr. Hayes put this on. What can you see? Mr. Hayes: Nothing.

Now see what chances there are of looking down or peeping. If anybody in this audience thinks they can see with that on step up and we will give you a chance.

The goggles were then placed on Willetta and the test began. Several people stepped up and she told the color of the dress, on the women, of the neckties and of the suits on the men. Numerous pieces of yarn were picked out and handed to her and she picked them all out as to color, only missing two, and quickly correcting herself on those. Mr. Hooper placed the end of a stick on his head and Wil-

letta repeated his words from the other end being placed in the palm of her hand. Numerous pieces of paper money were handed to her and she correctly named the amount of all. When a book of travelers checks was handed to her, she gave the correct amounts, but added that it did not feel like real money. She read the headlines of the Janesville Gazette and of the Chicago Tribune with her fingers, tracing the outlines. She answered several questions of people in the audience with her portophone as a means of hearing. She was shown a picture of a nude baby and asked how many persons in the picture and answered "One, and he's not fixed very much; the way I'd like to be fixed tonight."

At the close of the experiment Mr. Hooper said he hoped that the workers would go back to their homes looking for potential Willetta Huggins. He predicted that what the Wisconsin girl has shown the world will change the whole system of teaching, if there doesn't grow out of it an entirely new psychology.

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AUTHOR A.W.B. JANESVILLE, WIS.
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